

VZCZCXRO0259
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHAE #0267/01 2240439
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 120439Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY ASMARA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0426
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC
RUMICEA/JICCENT MACDILL AFB FL
RHRMDAB/COMUSNAVCENT
RUEPADJ/CJTF-HOA J2X CAMP LEMONIER DJ
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASMARA 000267

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR AF/E AND DRL
LONDON AND PARIS FOR AFRICA WATCHERS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/10/2019
TAGS: PGOV PROP PHUM ER
SUBJECT: MOST OF G-15 REPORTED DEAD

REF: ASMARA 161

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald K. McMullen for reason 1.4(d).

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Nine of the 11 imprisoned members of the G-15 are dead, according to a recent news article from the website assenna.com. The website published Tigrinya documents supposedly from the Office of the President that detail the arrest and cause/date of death for nine members of the G-15. The news story may be an attempt by the popular website to force the Eritrean government's (GSE's) hand and admit to the whereabouts of the former political leaders. If the story is true, the only two living, imprisoned members of the G-15 are Petros Solomon and Haile Woldensae, both former ministers. End Summary.

G-15: A BRIEF HISTORY

¶2. (SBU) The G-15 is a group of Eritrean political activists who were imprisoned in September 2001 for criticizing the president's one-man rule. Each member was a Central Council member and high ranking official who held significant clout both during and immediately after the war for independence. These members continually pushed the president for democratic reform during the country's formative years. However, between January 2000 and the political crackdown in September 2001, President Isaias shuffled, demoted, and politically ostracized various members of the G-15 to consolidate his power. On September 14, 2001, the GSE arrested 11 of the G-15. Of the remaining four, one member (Mohammed Berhan Blata) recanted his statements, and three were out of the country at the time (Mesfin Hagos and Adhanom Gebremariam, both now involved in Eritrean opposition movements; and Haile Menkerios, now UN A/S General for Political Affairs).

THE NINE DECEASED

¶3. (SBU) The following are the names, bio details, and the reported conditions under which the nine members died:

- Beraki Gebreselassie (former Ambassador to Germany): died July 19, 2007 from chronic kidney condition.

- Jermano Natti (former PFDJ Executive Committee): died March 17, 2008 from chronic bladder and kidney infections.

- Berhane Gebregzabher (former Secretary of Industry): Died June 20, 2002. Court carried out the death penalty based on

the recommendations of Naizghi Kiflu.

- Hamed Hamid (former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia): Died November 7, 2005 from a snake bite.
- Estifanos Seyoum (former Secretary of Finance): Died September 28, 2007 from chronic diabetes and various infections.
- Salih Idris Kekia (former Ambassador to Sudan and Director of the Office of the President): Died August 15, 2003 from complications of an earlier suicide attempt that left his left side of the body paralyzed.
- Aster Fessehatsion (former Director of the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs): Died April 14, 2003 from a chronic heart condition and a hunger strike.
- Mahmud Mehamed Sherifo (former Minister of Local Government): Died December 21, 2003 from high blood pressure, diabetes, and asthma.
- General Ogbe Abraha (former Minister of Labor and Social Welfare): Believed to have died first among the G-15 (Note: the Assenna website claims to have not obtained General Ogbe's death certificate. End note).

TWO STILL ALIVE?

14. (SBU) The report did not mention Petros Solomon and Haile
ASMARA 00000267 002 OF 002

Wold'ensae (both former Ministers of Foreign Affairs) among the dead. The omission of these two names may lend the story some credibility in that Petros Solomon is believed to still be alive (reftel). Leaving these two off the list of the deceased may also provide hope to Eritreans who still expect to one day see an internal changing of the guard.

WHY RELEASE THE INFORMATION NOW?

15. (SBU) The information of the arrests and subsequent deaths of the G-15 members supposedly came from "secret documents" loaded onto laptops stolen from the president's office, according to the Assenna website. Embassy sources state that many Eritreans believed the G-15 to have died long ago; the documents appear to support this belief.

16. (C) COMMENT: The G-15 members were as important to the struggle and the development of the country as those in power currently. The underpaid, overworked, and increasingly disgruntled military is the most likely impetus for change. Should the military oust Isaias and his cohorts, the absence of these nine G-15 members would be a significant void in the contingent of ex-fighters who have the credentials and clout to establish a democratic civilian government.

MCMULLEN